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Cohen, Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature

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SARAH BLACHER COHEN, ED. *COMIC RELIEF: HUMOR IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE*. URBANA, CHICAGO, AND LONDON: THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS, 1978. 339 pp. \$15.00.

The year was 1983. Praisers of the literary imagination who believed that their praises should reflect some impassioned bit of the imaginative—those artist-critic-scholar-teacher out-of-sorts like Guy Davenport, or Richards Gilman and Howard, or George Steiner, or the brothers Fussell, for whom “excellence...is ever radical”—all these had been interned upon the new Sum-thin-Else Star. (To a neighboring star, rumor has it, must eventually come Sanford Pinsker, Earl Rovit, Max F. Schulz, and Philip Stevick, especially if they insist on writing with a brio that places them in brilliant relief to the twelve others with whom they have presently, unfortunately, been associated.) A few remaining disciples of letters and the fine arts were now relocated in the High Aesthetic Education Camp of the One Galactic University Sandbox, Inc. “G. U. S.,” President Raquel Welch wished to be quoted as saying, “well, like I mean G. U. S. is just the center, you know, of glam.”

All classes, switched off from *Real People* and fed to satiety upon the physical immolations and mutilations of *That's Incredible*, switch on now for the academic, psychic permutations of such pastimes wherein, under penalty of deconstruction, former questioners are tortured by questions culled from their professorial colleagues' Chattanoogaogachoochoo-evangelical or Amtrak-lugubrious redundancies (e. g., “*essential to the kind of realistic humor fundamental to the South*” [italics mine, *naturally*]). Tonight the program's called *Comic Relief*; and to qualify as a contestant, one (1) must profess to extol global human unity while subconsciously hustling his/her peculiar subject's provincial division or subdivision (as obstreperously opposed to the subject's enemy's ill-claimed, ill-gained colony); (2) be able to do the text-crawl without once coming up for air; and (3) footnote oneself interminably (e. g., “The concept of diabolical comedy has developed from my thinking since the publication of my....The germ of this essay will be found in ch. 6”; “In...I distinguish between a sequence of three imaginative structures”)—a special prize having already been awarded, however, to the assembler (*not* an author) of “Laughter in the South” for grossing the record of self-referential reverences in his footnotes 4, 6, 7, 9, 35 and 36.

But here's our first contestant and the first question. What work of literature “attacks all forms of allegiance. It is sophisticated, yet

primitive; traditional, yet innovative"; is "an ingenious union of conventional comic modes transformed by the keen intellect of an inventive, learned, and serious artist"; "is a landmark...for its comic structure...built on irony, contradiction, and absurdity"; is "slangy in one stance, academic in another, loaded poetically with imagery at one moment, mathematically bare of imagery in the next"; whose levels of meaning "are realistic, surrealistic, symbolic, mythic, existential"; whose humor "is achieved by irony"; whose "wit and liveliness is maintained by the sense of timing"; whose "nightmare violence, hysteria, absurdity, the grotesque, word play, and puns lead to a kind of epiphany"?

Silence. Then clanged the bell.

"*The Waste Land!*" the contestant shrieked in desperation.

"SOR-ry!" the ringmaster responded, motioning to the headsman waiting in the wings. "The answer is *Invisible Man*, which—audience, talk about life recycling criticism!—is about to become your 'actual condition'."

"But that's not fair!" the victim countered. "You didn't tell me if the comedy or humor (is there a difference?) was written by a man or a woman; or his/her sexual hang-ups, -ons, -outs; whether black or white, and a totally true, partially true, partially false, totally false black or white, or Catholic or Protestant or Jew, for that matter. And what backwater or province within what state within what.... And what language he/she reads, speaks, writes fluently; what dialect.... And if he/she's a sci-fi, sitcom, porn, dreck freak. And, and, and.... Give me one more chance!"

"Give him one more chance!" shouts the audience.

And so, reluctantly, the ringmaster does. "Then, what work 'is an excursion into politics, psychology, sociology, myth, anthropology, history, occultism, blues, and jazz—an amalgam of the real, the fantastic, and the absurd'; whose 'humor is achieved by irony and contradiction, by "impossible" situations and the constant collision of the sublime and the ridiculous, the solemn and the lewd, the bitter and the joyous'; whose 'range...of imagination and the richness of...allusions are at times baffling'; but which is clearly concerned with 'the condition of humanity in western civilization—our loss of the capacity for freedom, joy, and love, our substitution of artifacts for art, salesmanship for literature, imperialism for a sense of world community, private gain for humane values'?"

And again, silence. But in the semi-second before the bell clanged,

the contestant exclaimed: "Oh—*BLEEP*—go ahead and cut off my—*BLEEP*—or is it—*BLEEP*!"

And so the successful premiere came and went, and came and went again, and again, scoring with all classes that could have it—like its t-shirts, its burg[h]lers, its fruity concentrates, its snap-crackle-pop miracle-oats—"its way," any day or all day. Or so they think, or like to think that they think? To wit, from the well-placed *terminal* piece here *alone*: "There are also poets who are humorless—W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Mark Strand, and Robert Lowell, for example—and others, such as Sylvia Plath and her followers, for whom humor is so transparently lacking in delight that they fail entirely to be humorous"; "The great modern poets—Hardy, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Rilke, Valéry, Mallarmé—were rarely humorous"; "Ammons is a poet who has successfully *integrated* humor into his poetry. Humor isn't the main business of his poems, but without it they wouldn't be the same"; "This variety, in turn, results in an eclectic variety of styles, eclectic enough that my division...into two groups is a bit too simple. Still, I'll stay with it...." *Comic Relief?* Blessed Comic Relief Ammons dine of some other *Sphere* altogether: "often those who are not good for much else turn to thought...."

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